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ABSTRACT

In the current environment of increasing competition for shrinking resources and the dramatic changes in educational service delivery in response to recent technological advances, marketing is becoming increasingly important to the success of adult literacy programs. Individual attitudes toward marketing in the educational sector differ greatly depending on how the term is understood. Within the context of adult basic education, the objective of marketing may be understood as bringing about voluntary exchanges of values between adult literacy program providers and their target markets or constituencies. Organizations' philosophies will determine the kind of activities they undertake and the way they conduct those activities. Marketing philosophy demands that program administrators and instructors alike focus primarily on their students' needs and see those needs holistically. It is particularly important that adult literacy program administrators wishing to be proactive in their marketing efforts do the following: ascertain their program's service philosophy and determine how it can be made more effective, acquire marketing knowledge, and conduct market research. (MN)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

MARKETING ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS: MEETING THE CHALLENGES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Steve Olu Michael and Elaine Hogard

Introduction

Recently, President Clinton made literacy part of his 1996 election campaign issue. A strong nation requires informed citizenry; hence, literacy has become the cornerstone of democracy in the information age. Therefore, visionary leaders recognize the importance of making resources available for the promotion of the general literacy level in their communities.

However, in spite of the recognition of the importance of literacy by the President and his recent pledge of support, adult literacy program providers and administrators are increasingly facing challenges. For example, program providers continue to wrestle against resource constraints. In some places, growth in literacy program budgets have increased less than inflationary rate, while there are those whose budgets have actually declined. Also, there are places where budgets have not increased commensurably with the increase in the demand for services. Another challenge before program administrators is how to respond to the growing competition within the environment. Competition for resources is increasing and even more intense is the competition for students and stakeholders' support. Technology is changing educational service delivery and the possibility of virtual classroom and distributed learning means that adult literacy program providers will need to reconceptualize program planning, delivery, and evaluation in order to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

The Purpose

The adoption of strategic marketing has been recommended strongly in the business world for service providers who intend to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present information on marketing and how it may be used to achieve the goals of adult literacy programs. In addition, specific recommendations that have implications for policy changes are provided.

Definitions of Marketing and Relevance To Educational Enterprise

Michael (1990) observed that "marketing is an evolving practice whose definition depends upon the geographical and economic context, time, and the level of knowledge and insight of the definer" (p. 2). Differences in our understanding of what marketing is are at the root of the differences in emotions exhibited against marketing in the educational sector. Many of us associate marketing with crass-commercialization, foot-in-the-door salesmanship, and aggressive selling gimmicks. With this understanding, it is no surprise that many educators are repulsed when advised to adopt marketing strategies for their educational delivery.

But Johnson (1979) acknowledged that "when marketing is understood and applied appropriately, it is consistent with many ideals in higher education [including adult literacy programs]. . . . Marketing, in fact, is a people-oriented, student-oriented concept and is the opposite of crass promotion or poorly conceived

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schemes" (p. 28). Also, Kriegbaum (1981) pointed out that

> *fortunately, Gresham's law does not apply in [educational] marketing: In the long run, good marketing tends to drive out bad marketing. Good marketing also tends to drive out non-marketing, and very few small colleges [and adult program providers] can afford the risks of refusing to market themselves in this environment. (p. 36)*

Kotler and Fox (1985) defined marketing as

> *the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives. Marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meet the target markets' needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service the markets. (p. 7)*

The essence of marketing, therefore, is to bring about voluntary exchanges of values between adult literacy program providers and their target markets or constituencies. Exchanges of values are achieved by striving to meet the target market's needs and desires. As Michael (1990) pointed out

> *Marketing is both a management philosophy and a planning process which has as its objective the continuous satisfaction of an institution's [in this case, adult literacy program providers'] relevant publics in a way that ensures institutional [or program] vitality and growth. (p. 2).*

Marketing As a Philosophy

The philosophy of an organization determines what kind of activities are undertaken and how these activities are carried out. Service philosophy, therefore, dictates how the service is conducted. According to Michael (1990), "marketing, as a philosophy of an educational institution, requires sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of the educational publics" (p. 5). This philosophy demands that adult literacy programs be conceived and implemented on the basis of the characteristics, needs, and interests of students. This philosophy is contrary to the elitist attitude that once characterized educational service delivery.

Marketing philosophy demands that both program administrators and instructors focus primarily on the needs of their students and that these needs be seen holistically. In order to do this, therefore, program providers must have knowledge of who their publics are--their characteristics, their composition, their interests, their opinions concerning our programs, and their aspirations. As Kriegbaum (1981) observed, marketing efforts can only be successful when program providers adopt it as a guiding philosophy.

Marketing Process

As a process, marketing entails sequential steps of activities and operation. Figure 1 provides a marketing process model that have been recommended for educational institutions. (See Michael 1990).

First and foremost in the marketing process is the development and definition of a mission statement. Many program providers who have implemented strategic planning are familiar, by now, with the importance and the process of developing a mission statement. (For more information on strategic planning, see Research To Practice, January 1995, 039-0200-0010 issue). Mission statements are developed from the information gleaned from the environment. Data obtained from the environment are of two kinds: those pertaining to the external environment, including the political, cultural, economic, educational issues listed in the Figure 1; and those pertaining to the internal environment, including staff strength and program resources and constraints. The combination of these two sources of data yield what we generally call SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis in the business world.

From the mission and marketing research data, program administrators need to develop program objectives. It is advisable that these objectives be written to allow for clear evaluation of their achievement. Vague objectives lead to vague evaluation.

Specific contribution of marketing especially when compared with strategic planning comes with the next two phases: developing marketing strategies and marketing mix. Marketing strategies are conceived and developed based on market segments. Program markets are clearly defined in such a way that psychographical, demographical, tastes, needs, cultural, economic etc. differences among market groups are vivid and distinct. It is the

clear delineation of segments that allows for targeting strategies to occur. Target becomes possible only when segments are clearly identified.

Marketing mix is developed based upon each market segment. The primary elements of the market mix vary from author to author but generally include the actual programs, promotional strategies, delivery methods, and pricing. The development of literacy programs, in terms of the content, the structure and integration of the content, the materials to be used, and the level of the curriculum must reflect the unique differences of each segment. Second, educational administrators in general make the mistake of thinking that their services are so important to society that they do not need to actively promote these services. In a competitive environment, this is wrong because there are many stimuli within the environment competing for attention of students and important stakeholders and because it is erroneous for administrators to think that both the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of literacy or education are readily understood by all of us. Promotional activities include methods of reaching market segments and to the extent that these segments are different, these promotional activities must be different. Promotional activities are adopted to inform, but also to educate or change the behavior of vital constituents.

Delivery methods must be tailored to meet the needs of each segment. Perhaps, there are those who will find distributed learning and computer-based instruction the most convenient means for attaining their education. Perhaps, some may prefer a face to face instruction and yet others may prefer a program that is delivered only during the weekends. The needs of each segment must be studied and responded to accordingly.

Experienced marketing experts understand that pricing or the determination of educational fees can be used as an effective strategy to serve different market segments. The use of scholarship and various financial aid packages is an example of pricing strategies in educational setting. Indeed, different needs will attract different costs and our planning must reflect that.

The marketing mix is the combination of program, promotion, pricing, and delivery strategies for a literacy program administrator to be implemented. Implementation is evaluated and the information feedback loops into the marketing research database. This process, if carried out appropriately and effectively, ensures program responsiveness and adaptiveness to the changing environment.

Specific Recommendations

Adult literacy program administrators who intend to be proactive will find these recommendations relevant in their efforts:

a) Change Service Philosophy. Your present service has a philosophy whether you know it or not. The philosophy may be a product-oriented one in which case all your efforts concentrate on developing the best adult literacy program in town and hoping that the best program has its natural appeal. Or, the philosophy may be a selling-oriented one in which case efforts are being made to advertise and promote as much as possible without attention to program quality. Marketing philosophy requires a comprehensive understanding of customer's needs and a holistic approach to meeting those needs. Program administrators should, therefore, present an opportunity for their staff to ascertain what their present service philosophy is and how it can be changed to be more effective.

b) Marketing Knowledge. It is one thing to have marketing philosophy, it is another to have marketing knowledge. The marketing planning model presented in this article requires a good understanding of marketing and a good skill of planning to implement. As a first step, program administrators will find marketing literature and tools that have been developed for educational administrators a good source to enrich their understanding. Marketing seminars are also an important source of acquiring marketing knowledge. External consultants have been found very useful and profitable both in the profit and non-profit organizations. For your program efforts to succeed, your program staff must be properly trained.

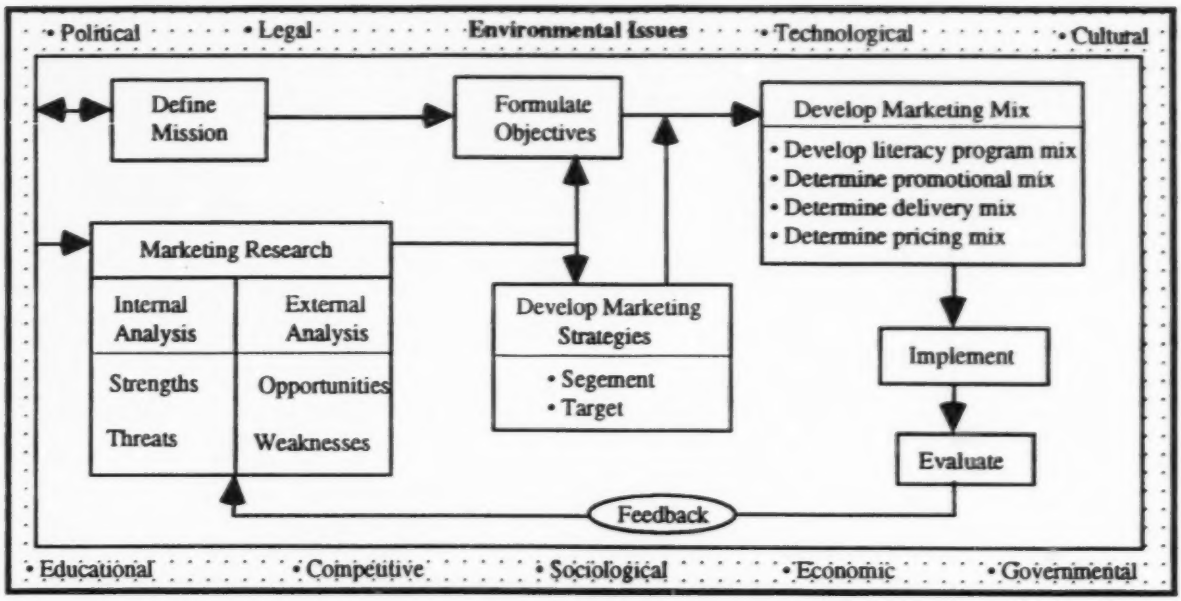
c) Market Research. There is no substitute to marketing knowledge. In the twenty-first century, business survival will depend very much on the knowledge of relevant publics. Service providers must begin to obtain important market data. Data must be organized and analyzed to be useful and important decisions must be based on information obtained through this exercise. Without valid data, it is virtually impossible to sense, serve, and satisfy relevant publics in an increasingly competitive environment.

Conclusion

Marketing is not a Madison-Avenue gimmick employed by desperate unscrupulous salesmen.

Marketing is an exchange facilitating strategy that ensures survival of both profit and non-profit organizations in a competitive environment. Its application and relevance to educational sector and, indeed, to adult literacy program administrators has much promise. However to be effective, Michael (1990) concluded that:

> *Good marketing in education does not consist of sporadic efforts. It does not equate merely with aggressive promotions, nor is it satisfied by occasional visits of external marketing consultants...Good marketing is based on organizational philosophy and is translated into a carefully planned program to enhance client satisfaction, institutional effectiveness, and societal advancement. (p. 7)*



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